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Donald W. Viney

Pittsburg State University, dviney@pittstate.edu

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Stephen Fry and Charles Hartshorne: God and unjustified suffering¹

Donald Wayne Viney

The work of Stephen Fry is a treasure chest with many nuggets worth saving, but some of it is fool's gold. Who could not enjoy the television series (*Kingdom*) in which he starred as the country solicitor, Peter Kingdom? Who could not delight in his playful reflections on the pedantry of language Nazis (available on YouTube)? Recently, however, he was asked on RTE One (Irish radio) by the well-known interviewer, Gay Byrne, what he'd say to God if, contrary to his atheism, he found himself, after his death, at the pearly gates. Fry's response, born of moral outrage, is worth appreciating both for its articulate summary of what passes as "the new atheism" but also for the profound ignorance it reveals in an otherwise well-educated spirit.

Fry would confront the Almighty he imagines with a list of ills not caused by human beings that lead to terrible suffering such as "bone cancer in children" and "insects whose life-cycle is to burrow into the eyes of children and make them blind." The deity that creates a universe in which these things occur is, among other things, "capricious, mean-minded, stupid," "a maniac," and "a monster" worthy of no one's respect. Fry rightly says that atheism is not simply a matter of denying that God exists; it also involves asking what God would be like if God existed. According to Fry, God "could easily have made a creation" in which these and other examples of gratuitous suffering did not exist. It seems that it is less the goodness of God than God's power that is the fulcrum of Fry's argument. The defects that he alleges in God's character stem from God's failing to do the right thing when it was so clearly (according to Fry) within God's power to do otherwise.

As I listened to Fry's impassioned complaint, I could not help but imagine Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000), the American philosopher, nodding in agreement in rejecting what Hartshorne called "the tyrant view of God." But Hartshorne's appreciation would have stopped short of approval because of Fry's uncritical acceptance of a theological view that Hartshorne considered himself and others to have discredited. It has now been a bit over thirty years since Hartshorne spoke of the tyrant deity in the aptly titled, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (State University of New York Press, 1984), a book written for a popular audience that was modestly successful. It has been sixty-seven years since Hartshorne published the more technically sophisticated classic, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (Yale, 1948). Hartshorne was well-known to philosophers and theologians throughout his lengthy life and he achieved a modicum of recognition beyond that circle—see, for example, Greg Easterbrook's interview with Hartshorne, "A Hundred Years of Thinking About God: A

¹ Originally published on-line at: <http://www.processphilosophy.org/omnipotence-and-other-theological-mistakes-charles-hartshornes-alternative-to-atheism.html> under the title "Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes: Donald Wayne Viney responds to Stephen Fry on Atheism with an invitation to consider Charles Hartshorne's Alternative" (2015).

Philosopher Soon to be Rediscovered,” in *U. S. News and World Report* (February 23, 1998), pp. 61, 65.

Unlike Fry, Hartshorne was a theist, more precisely, a “neoclassical” or “dipolar” theist. The basic idea is that it is necessarily the case that God *acts and is acted upon* by the world and its creatures. In agreement with Fry, Hartshorne thought it important to ask how best to conceive the nature of God. This question, posed as a hypothetical, is no less central to atheism than it is to theism: Assuming there is a God, what must God be like? Where Hartshorne parts company most dramatically from Fry is in questioning the classical concept of omnipotence, the idea that God must have the power, unilaterally, to decide any and every particular detail of the world. Hartshorne went so far as to say that this idea of divine power is “not even coherent enough to be false.” Hartshorne considered the classical idea to be a mistake because it is power divorced from social, evolutionary, and developmental contexts. For Hartshorne, power, including the eminent form of power, is always, and *necessarily*, power over against other beings with some degree of power. A consequence of Hartshorne’s view is that tragedy is possible, even in a God-created world, for shared creativity or power is a risky business. Tragedies, moreover, are *tragedies even for God*, at least if one wishes to retain the idea of God’s goodness—as Hartshorne argued, there is divine passivity as well as divine activity.

More than one of those who call themselves “new atheists” respond to philosophers like Hartshorne by accusing them of being liberals who wish to make belief in God intellectually respectable. I don’t know what Fry thinks about this. I hope that he sees it for the dodge that it is. *Ad hominem* argument is a two-edged blade. Perhaps certain atheists simply want to make it easy on themselves by not considering the most sophisticated views of their opponents. As entertaining as personal attacks can be, it is finally best to set them aside and deal honestly with the arguments.

Any number of philosophers and theologians have followed Hartshorne’s line of thinking—some with little or no acquaintance with Hartshorne’s writings—so it is an instance of what Hartshorne called “cultural lag” for atheists like Fry not to have gotten the message. It may well be that Fry (and English new atheists generally) don’t bother much with what an American philosopher says, unless he or she is an atheist. On the other hand, it was an English theist of high learning, transplanted to America, who said, “The worship of glory arising from power is not only dangerous: it arises from a barbaric conception of God. I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the bones of those slaughtered because of men intoxicated by its attraction.” (A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 1926, chapter II, part I). Hartshorne, who knew Whitehead personally, agreed with this sentiment.

The most recent of Hartshorne’s books to be published was *Creative Experiencing: A Philosophy of Freedom* (State University of New York Press, 2011), a book he completed but did not manage to publish. Here is what Hartshorne says in that book (p. 98):

[Dipolar theism] does not assign to God what many have meant by *omnipotence*, from which it followed that divine wisdom and power simply determined details of the world, implying that creaturely freedom determined nothing or was not freedom at all. God has

optimal or best possible power, surpassing that of any conceivable other; so that the divine power is the greatest conceivable. However, genuine power is power over those who have some power of their own. *Power cannot be monopolized*, even in the best form of power. Something is left undecided for others to decide. The classical problem of evil was in this way a pseudo-problem, employing a pseudo-concept of divine power. Not simply human freedom has to be taken into account; any creature simply as such must be an above-zero form of less-than-divine freedom. What I call the “formula of immanence and transcendence” is as follows: properties optimal in deity are less than optimal but still positively present in all creatures. Thus, if love is optimal in God no creature is totally without love in that word’s most general meaning. Similarly, if freedom is optimal in God no creature is wholly without it. I take the new physics to make this compatible with our knowledge. It alters the problem of evil radically.

This quote can be considered as a way of tempering Fry’s views and as an invitation to entertain more adequate ideas about the meaning of power. I consider it an extreme exaggeration to think that Hartshorne’s view is the last word on this or any other subject. Nevertheless, Hartshorne’s critique of the concept of omnipotence introduced novel and illuminating perspectives on the problems of theodicy that it is intellectually irresponsible to ignore.